

Marshall McLuhan Foresees The Global Village

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.

- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964.

Marshall McLuhan's insights made the concept of a global village, interconnected by an electronic nervous system, part of our popular culture well before it actually happened.

Marshall McLuhan was the first person to popularize the concept of a global village and to consider its social effects. His insights were revolutionary at the time, and fundamentally changed how everyone has thought about media, technology, and communications ever since. McLuhan chose the insightful phrase "global village" to highlight his observation that an electronic nervous system (the media) was rapidly integrating the planet -- events in one part of the world could be experienced from other parts in real-time, which is what human experience was like when we lived in small villages.

While McLuhan popularized this concept, he was not the first to think about the unifying effects of communication technology. One of the earliest thinkers along this line was Nicolas Tesla, who in an interview with *Colliers* magazine in 1926 stated: "When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance. Not only this, but through television and telephony we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of thousands of miles; and the instruments through which we shall be able to do this will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket."

McLuhan's second best known insight is summarized in the expression "the medium is the message", which means that the qualities of a medium have as much effect as the information it transmits. For example, reading a description of a scene in a newspaper has a very different effect on someone than hearing about it, or seeing a picture of it, or watching a black and white video, or watching a colour video. McLuhan was particularly fascinated by the medium of television, calling it a "cool" medium, noting its soporific effect on viewers. He took great satisfaction years later when medical studies showed that TV does in fact cause people to settle into passive brain wave patterns. One wonders what McLuhan would make of the Internet?

Like Norbert Wiener and J.C.R. Licklider, McLuhan made a study of the extrapolation of current trends in technology, and specialized in the effects on human communications. He generally felt that the developments he described would be positive, but particularly worried about the potential for very sophisticated, manipulative advertising.

McLuhan's ideas have permeated the way we in the global village think about technology and media to such an extent that we are generally no longer aware of the revolutionary effect his concepts had when they were first introduced. McLuhan made the idea of an integrated planetary nervous system a part of our popular culture, so that when the Internet finally arrived in the global village it seemed no less amazing, but still somehow in the natural order of things.

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